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CAMBRIDGE ADDS MALAY STUDIES POST

By
Philip Bowring



About time, too.

Cambridge University is appointing a lectureship in Malay Area Studies. That may not sound like news, but the remarkable fact is that neither of the United Kingdom's oldest and best-known universities has ever had such a post. Oxford University was advised in 1682 by the directors of the English East India Company to appoint two professors of Malay, one for language, one for literature. Some 339 years later Oxford still has not made an appropriate appointment.

The Cambridge post owes its creation to the Tunku Fund, money donated to St Catharine's College, part of the university, in memory of a college alumnus, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first prime minister of independent Malaya, and then of Malaysia. In keeping with character, the Tunku, a prince of Kedah born when its sovereign was the King of Siam, the lectureship scope includes the whole pan-Malay world. Its scope covers not only Malaysia and Indonesia and but also the Philippines, Singapore, and other places which bear a pan-Malay heritage. A Malay nationalist and onetime head of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, the Tunku was a broad-minded man who enjoyed a glass or two of whisky and successively married Chinese, British and Malay wives. His time studying at Cambridge was extended by time spent on, as he is said to have remarked, on "fast cars, fast women and not-so-fast horses."

St Catharine's College is also to follow up this lectureship post, which will begin in September, with a grant for research in the pan-Malay field.

The current ignorance in the UK and the west more generally of the wider Malay world of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines is all the more remarkable in that the British empire in Asia began in the Malukus in the early 17th century with the "acquisition" in 1611 of two tiny spice islands, Ai and Run, in the Banda archipelago - from which they were driven by the Dutch in 1616.

The lack of Oxford University enthusiasm for Malay studies didn't apply to the commercial community. The first English-Malay dictionary was published in 1701, written by a merchant, Thomas Bowrey, whose travels took him all over the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia. He wrote: "The Malayo tongue is absolutely necessary to trade in those seas." Stamford Raffles, who was to become fluent in Malay and established modern Singapore in 1820, learned his first Malay from Bowrey's book.

By that time, another onetime East India Company employee, William Marsden, had in 1783 published *The History of Sumatra*, a monumental work of 480 pages with numerous maps and illustrations and subtitled "*Containing an Account of the Government, Laws, Customs and Manners of the Native Inhabitants, a Description of the Natural Productions and a Relation of the Ancient Political State of that Island.*" More encyclopedia than history, it noted that despite its size, riches, and beauty the island was little known in the outside world. It became a model for Raffles' own *History of Java*, a two volume work published in 1817. Marsden had been based at Benkulu (Bencoolen), the port then controlled by the East India Company (the English swapped it for Dutch-ruled Melaka in 1824). Marsden went on to write another then important work, a *Grammar and Dictionary of the Malay Language* published in 1812. For Marsden, Malay was not only the *lingua franca* of the region but was noted for its "sweetness of sound, which have gained it the appellation of the Italian of the East." These qualities render it well adapted to poetry, which the Malays are passionately addicted to, with songs and recitation. He also noted the language's close similarity to others of the Philippine as well as Indonesian archipelago.

Given the English role in the Malay world from the islands of Ai and Run to Benkulu, the occupation of the island of Penang and the importance of the Malay states and Singapore to Britain for more than 150 years, the neglect of Malay studies in Britain has been astonishing. To date, only the School of Oriental and African Studies in London offers a degree course in it. It is perhaps no wonder that British commercial enterprise is now so conspicuous by its absence in the region, particularly in its two most populous states, Indonesia and the Philippines. Perhaps the lectureship financed by the Tunku Fund will be the start of a revival of interest by a Brexit Britain in sore need of a more international outlook.

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